



Formal Recognition for Beringia?

What is a Transboundary Conservation Area?

Nature rarely notices political boundaries as animal and plant species travel across these borders without permissions or visas.

Thus, countries sometimes agree to establish a transboundary area to conserve natural and cultural resources. In 1990, the Presidents of the United States and then, Soviet Union endorsed a proposal to establish an international park on both sides of the Bering Straits. In addition to promoting conservation, the intent was to re-establish the connections between people and communities, and cultural and subsistence practices interrupted by the cold war. Here, where Russia and the U.S. share a common maritime border, cooperative conservation also provides an opportunity to build and sustain peace.



While legislation to create an international park wasn't passed, Congress began funding a Shared Beringian Heritage Program through the National Park Service (NPS) in 1991. Since then, the types of transboundary areas have expanded as existing forms have been refined and new frameworks explored. Below is a brief discussion of some of these frameworks.



U.S. National Heritage Areas

The National Heritage Areas (NHA) program was created by the U.S. Congress in 1984, and is administered by the National Park Service. This program is not related to United Nations world heritage program. NHAs are places where natural, cultural, historic and scenic resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally important landscape.

They are proposed by a local entity which collaborates with residents, businesses, governments, non-profit organizations and others to promote conservation, community revitalization and economic development projects.

Participation in projects and programs is always voluntary. Continued use of NHAs by people whose traditions helped to shape the landscape enhances their significance.

The Kenai Mountains-Turnagain Arm National Heritage Area was established in March 2009 and is the first NHA in Alaska. Heritage areas similar to those in the U.S. exist in Europe, South America, Canada, Mexico and China. The U.S. National Heritage Area program could be expanded by Congress to include a cross-boundary area in Beringia.



International Parks

An international park spans across boundaries of two or more countries, linking established national parks and protected areas. It requires legislation by Congress followed by a formal agreement between the countries to be designated.

The world's first international park, the Glacier-Waterton International Peace Park, links Waterton Lakes Park in Canada and Glacier National Park in the U.S. It was formed in 1932, in response to post World War I efforts to promote world peace.

In Alaska, the Klondike Gold Rush International Historical Park was created with Canada in 1998. Two other international parks cross the United States/Canada border and efforts are under way for an international park linking Big Bend National Park in the United States with protected areas in Mexico.



Sister Parks and Other Non-Binding Agreements

International cooperation often occurs under non-binding agreements, meaning that neither country is bound by a legal agreement.

Several NPS sites have established sister park relationships with national parks in other countries. This is a non-binding arrangement with protected areas having some kind of designation or recognition at the national level.

Sister parks share a similarity of protected resources or a mutual interest in a common set of park management issues. The partnership increases information sharing and direct park-to-park contacts, and may be shorter-term in duration. In Alaska, Yukon Charley Rivers National Preserve and Gates of the Arctic National Park formed a sister-park relationship with Lake Hanka National Natural Preserve, Russia. There are other sister-parks in Alaska and many more in the continental U.S.

Other forms of non-binding agreements include official protocols signed by government agencies which publicly state their intent to work together. In some cases, such as along the eastern U.S. border with Canada, there are no signed agreements between protected areas, but they work cooperatively to address shared issues and concerns.

Renewed Interest in Beringia

There is renewed interest by United States and Russia at the national level to recognize the Beringia region. The NPS in Alaska does not have an existing proposal for international designation and is meeting with local residents and communities to discuss options, issues or concerns.

Recognition would cause no change to existing park boundaries or management; subsistence use and access under ANICLA; or the sovereign status of the U.S. and tribal governments.

